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THE OFFSHORE ISLANDS (Revision of CIA/RR GM-10, 8 October 1958)



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THE OFFSHORE ISLANDS

Since the evacuation of their remaining holdings off Chekiang Province early in 1955, the Nationalist position on the China coast has pivoted on 4 heavily fortified islands and 14 others, only lightly defended, which fringe Fukien Province. These offshore islands, in association with almost 50 uninhabited islets and numerous rocks, are distributed among two major aggregations: the Quemoy group, situated adjacent to the harbor of Amoy, and the Matsu complex, to the north, lying off the estuary of the Min Chiang (river) and its port of Foochow. Located midway between these two groups are the Wu-ch'iu Islands, which are also in Nationalist hands but are of small extent and dubious significance.

The Quemoy group, by virtue of its size and position, constitutes the Nationalist presence in China. These islands have a land area of 54 square miles or 81 percent of the total offshore territory currently held by Nationalist China. About 66,800 troops are stationed on the islands in addition to the 47,000* civilian population -- 73 and 76 percent of the respective offshore totals. With regard to position, Quemoy and its satellite isles can hardly be termed "offshore" since they are situated squarely astride the entrance to a 300-square-mile embayment wherein lies Hsia-men Tao (Amoy Island). From this position, commanding the deepwater channel to Amoy Harbor, the Nationalists have been able to restrict the shipping of the once-bustling port and have prevented its use as a naval base. In addition, Quemoy has provided staging areas for occasional sorties on the mainland, bases for the collection of intelligence, and posts for the detection of Communist air and naval movements -- functions shared with other offshore islands.

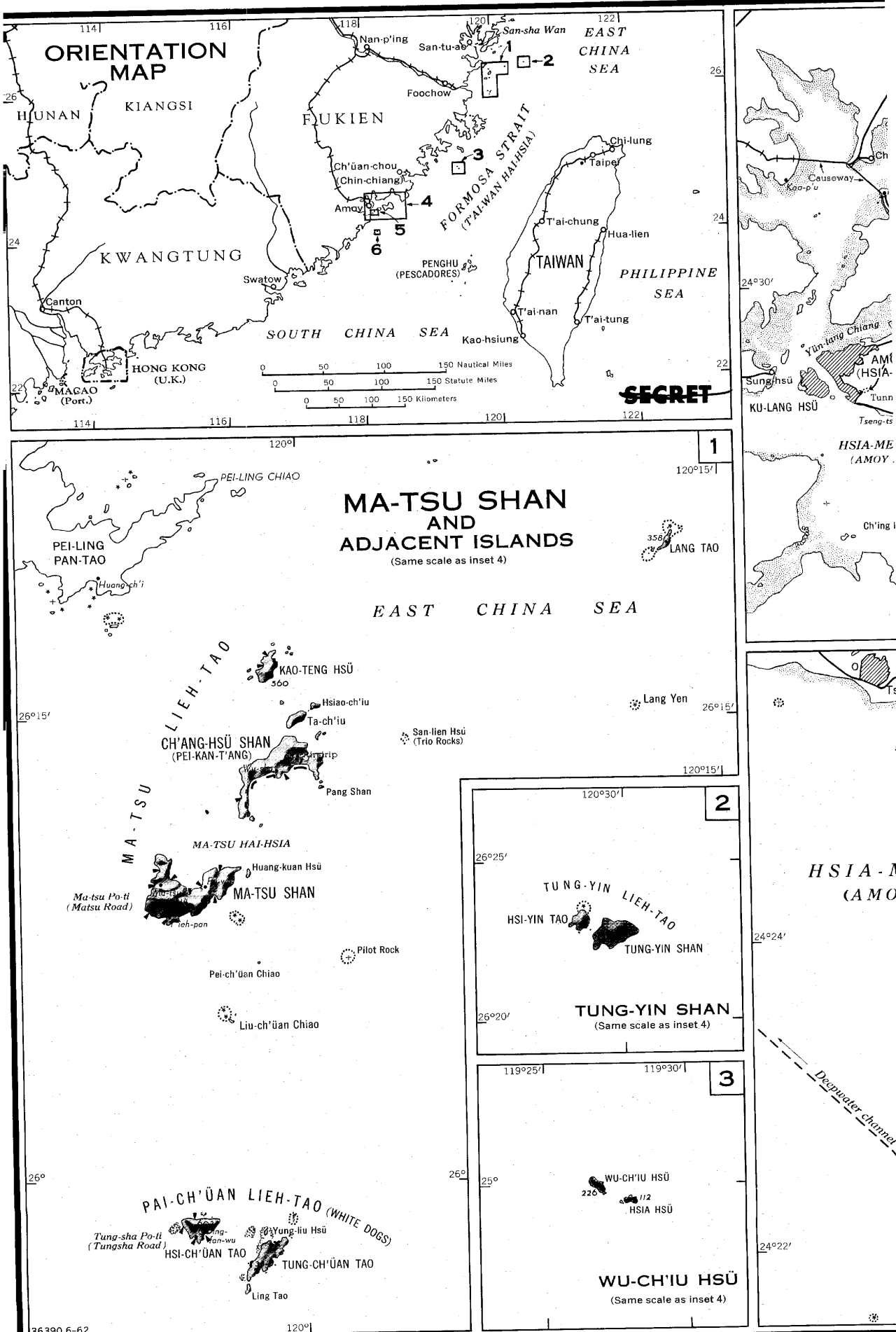
The group consists primarily of 47-square-mile Quemoy (Chin-men Tao) and its smaller neighbor, Lieh Hsu (Little Quemoy). Completing the group are 8 islets that lie adjacent to the deepwater channel to Amoy Harbor, 3 of which are lightly defended and have served as outposts for the larger islands. Another small island, Tung-ting Hsu (Chapel Island), lies 14 nautical miles** to the south and 8 miles off the mainland; it is included with the Quemoy group because of its former function as a navigation guide for Amoy-bound vessels.

Hourglass-shaped Quemoy is at no point more than 9.5 miles (about 20,000 yards) from surrounding Communist-held positions. In contrast, the Nationalist base on Penghu (Pescadores) is 75 miles to the southeast and Taiwan is at a distance of 103 miles. Quemoy consists predominantly of a series of intensively cultivated marine terraces 50 to 200 feet above the sea. In the east, the granitic mass of T'ai-wu Shan (hills) rises abruptly from gently rolling terraces to a maximum elevation of 830 feet, completely dominating the island and surrounding waters. In places, especially in the east and south, the terrace edges are extremely dissected and fringed by large areas of sandy waste terminating seaward in broad, gently sloping beaches.

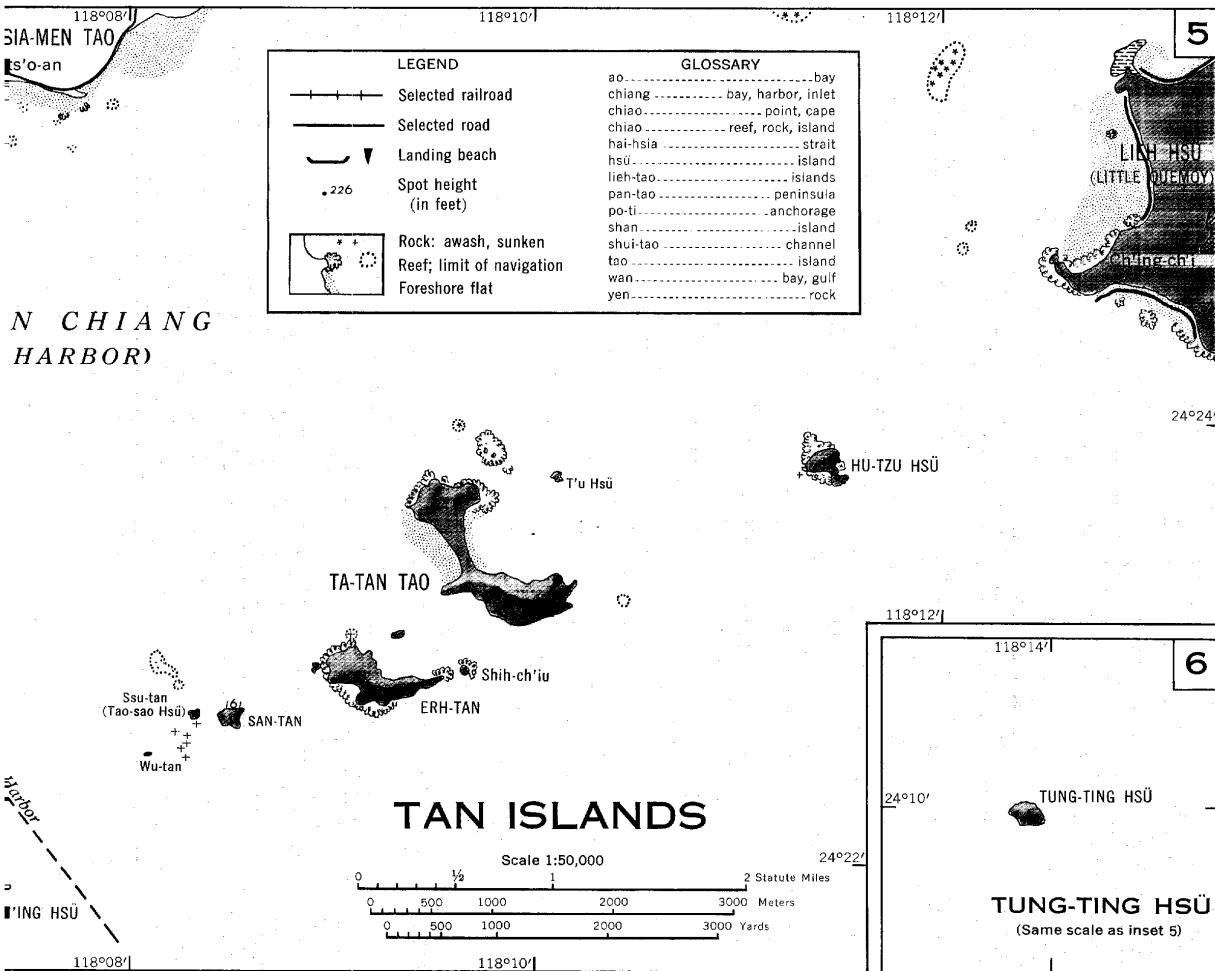
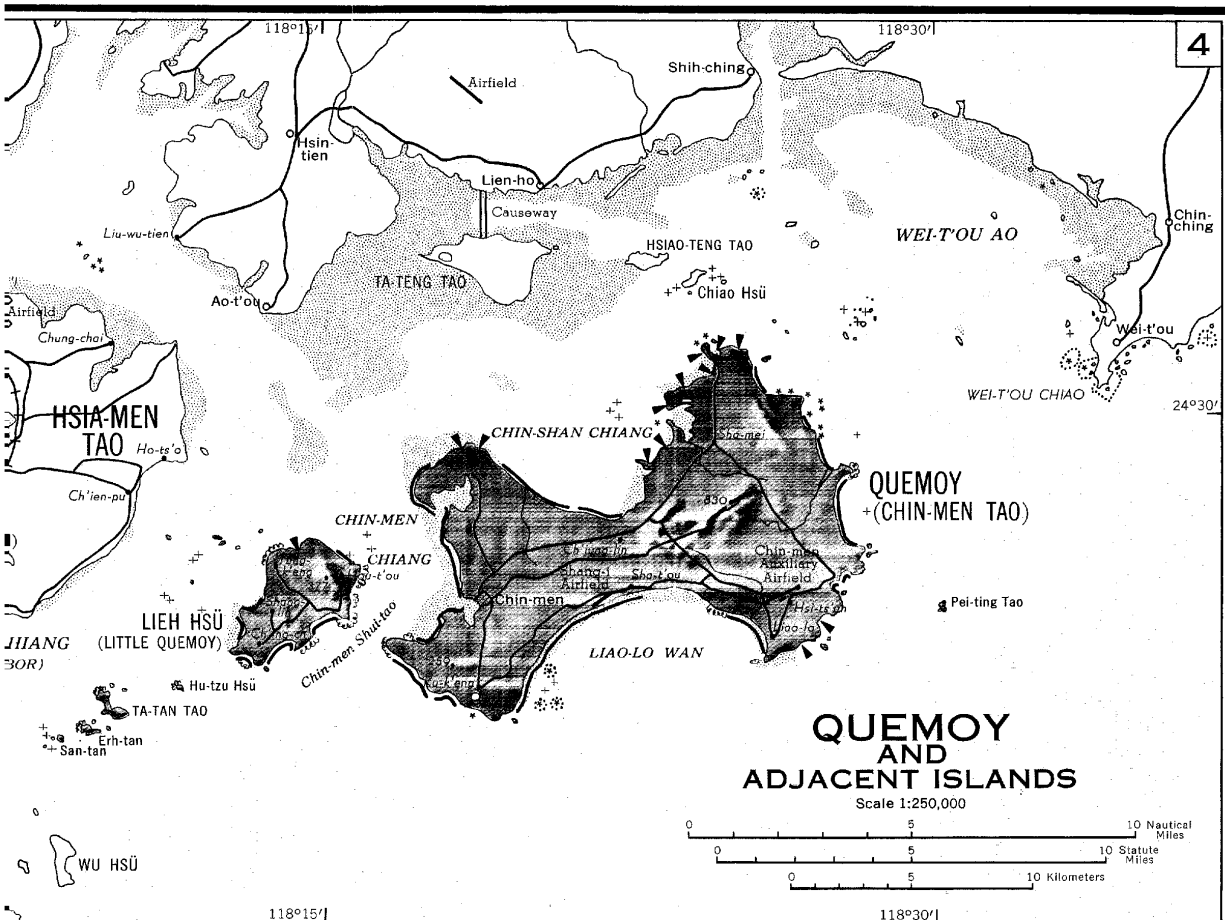
Of the estimated 43,000 civilians on Quemoy, approximately 60 percent are farmers, who raise sweet potatoes, some small grains and vegetables, and high-grade poultry and hogs. Most of the remainder is engaged in offshore fishing. The civilian population is 80 to 85 percent self-sufficient in food; and additional supplies, especially rice, must be imported from Taiwan. Seasonal shortages of drinking water are also of some concern.

*Civilian population figures for the Offshore Islands are the same as those given in CIA/RR GM-10, 8 October 1958, because later authoritative information is not available.

**All water distances mentioned in this report are expressed in terms of nautical miles. (1 nautical mile equals approximately 1.15 statute miles.)



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Kao-teng Hsü, the northernmost of the Matsu islands, is only 4.5 miles southeast of Pei-ling Pan-tao. This barren, half-mile-square island, previously uninhabited, is little more than a series of rocky hills with a few abandoned terraces. The indented coastline rises sheer from the sea and provides only two cove-head beaches, both facing the mainland and easily observable. At one of these, supplies are off-loaded and distributed throughout the island by means of cableways and a rail line. Despite its small size and meager 300-man complement, the island is essential to Nationalist defenses in the area; in Communist hands, artillery positioned on Kao-teng Hsü could render the larger islands untenable. The paucity of landing places on Kao-teng Hsü would be advantageous in the event of attack but detrimental during a siege.

Tung-yin Lieh-tao, considered here as part of the Matsu complex, are the farthest offshore of the Nationalist-held islands -- 24 miles east of the mainland and 20 miles south of the nearest Communist-held island. The nearest important Nationalist-held island, Ch'ang-hsü Shan, is 26 miles to the southwest; and Taiwan lies 84 miles to the southeast. From this isolated position, the islands can be of little value beyond the reporting of Communist activity in the San-sha Wan (Samsa Inlet) region.

Tung-yin Lieh-tao include two islands -- Tung-yin Shan, only 1.8 square miles in area, and Hsi-yin Tao, 500 yards to the northwest, which is about one-third its size. Both are steep, rocky hill lands with scattered cultivated terraces. Shores are precipitous except for a few tiny cove-head beaches. The civilian population -- 577 on the main island and only 70 on Hsi-yin Tao -- is engaged in fishing. The Tung-yin Area (garrison) Defense Command, under operational control of the Navy, presently consists of 8,000 regular troops. The rugged coastline of the islands and the recently completed fortifications favor the defenders in the event of an amphibious attack. However, a relatively broad upland on Tung-yin Shan provides a good drop zone for airborne troops. The islands are also vulnerable to siege; almost all food supplies are imported and even water is in seasonally short supply.

The Nationalist capability for resupply and reinforcement of any of the off-shore islands is determined to a great extent by prevailing weather conditions in the Taiwan Strait. During the summer (July through September), when the typhoon risk is high, traffic from Taiwan to the islands may be completely disrupted for long periods. Although autumn and winter are generally dry and fair, the advent of strong northeasterly winds in October ushers in a period of heavy seas which restrict movement and confine offloading to a few especially favorable, leeward beach sites. Several islands are completely cut off for weeks or, in the case of the Wu-ch'iu group, for months at a time. The gentle, variable winds and light seas of spring (April through June) provide optimum conditions for movement across the Taiwan Strait; but, in the Matsu area, frequent rain and fog limit visibility and restrict operations. For the Chinese Communists, however, seasonal variations in weather are of far less significance in amphibious operations against the off-shore islands. The distances involved are small, less than 9 miles in the area of Ma-tsu Shan, and only a little over a mile at Quemoy. There are probably enough suitable days to complete such operations during any season of the year; most favorable, however, is the relatively calm spring.

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The vulnerabilities of Quemoy to hostile mainland forces are many and serious. The position of the island, within range of a semicircle of Communist guns, is of greatest concern to defenders. The 53,000-man garrison (an additional 70 troops are stationed on the small island of Pei-ting Tao, to the east of Quemoy) must seek protection by "digging in"; however, the terraces comprising 75 percent of surface provide few opportunities for cover against heavy bombardment.

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Lieh Hsü, only 6.7 square miles in area, is nevertheless the second largest offshore island. Most of the estimated 5,000 civilians on the island are farmers. In surface configuration, Lieh Hsü closely resembles the larger island, with intensively cultivated marine terraces surmounted by scattered hills. The high ground extends from northeast to southwest, with a steep scarp facing east and south and a more gradual slope to the west.

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The island garrison numbers 12,500 and has faced defense problems like those of Quemoy but compounded by even greater proximity to Communist artillery positions. While under siege, Lieh Hsü has in the past been supplied almost entirely by airdrop and night movement of small craft from Quemoy.

Between Lieh Hsü and the deepwater channel leading to Amoy Harbor, a distance of 5 miles, are the Tan Islands, a chain of 8 rocky islets surrounded by reefs and shoals. Together, they are less than a square mile in area; but, in Communist hands, they would reduce the effectiveness of the Amoy blockade and further tighten the artillery ring around the Quemoy. Three of the islands have been defended by lightly armed troops of the Chin-men Defense Command -- Hu-tzu Hsü with a contingent of 90, Ta-tan Tao with 900, and Ehr-tan with 170. The others are believed to be uninhabited. Resupply during siege has been accomplished by small boats at night, but is extremely difficult owing to the lack of suitable landing places. The shortage of drinking water on the islets has also been a critical problem during siege.

Tung-ting Hsü, 13 miles south of the Tan Islands, is a steep-sided rock, less than 400 yards in diameter, with a lighthouse that was once a useful landmark for vessels approaching Amoy. Shoal water to the west compels shipping to bear seaward of the island, making it a useful observation post. The garrison of 70 lightly armed troops stationed here is almost wholly dependent upon naval assistance in the defense of the tiny island.

Midway between the Quemoy group and the Matsu complex, and 71 miles west of Taiwan are the Wu-ch'iu Islands, least important of all Nationalist offshore holdings. These two islands, only 14 miles southeast of the mainland, however do provide useful observation posts for the defense of Taiwan. Both have abrupt, rocky coasts and barren, hummocky uplands with general elevations of from 50 to 150 feet. Neither has suitable landing beaches, but facilities for the offloading of supplies have been constructed on 250-acre Wu-ch'iu Hsü. The Wu-ch'iu Area (garrison) Defense Command, under operational control of the Navy, is presently manned by a total of 447 troops on Wu-ch'iu Hsü and on the smaller island of Hsia Hsü, 1,400 yards to the southeast. Although evacuation of these islets has been recommended in the past because of resupply difficulties and their questionable strategic value, additional fortifications have been constructed on Wu-ch'iu Hsü since 1958 and its defensive network is now one of the densest on the Offshore Islands.

Farther north the three routes of access to the port of Foochow are dominated by islands of the Matsu complex. From the north, shipping to Foochow must pass between Pei-ling Pan-tao (peninsula) and Ma-tsu Lieh-tao (islands); from the east, the route lies between Ma-tsu Lieh-tao and Pai-ch'üan Lieh-tao (White Dogs); and in the south, between Pai-ch'üan Lieh-tao and the mainland. From these Nationalist-held islands, traffic entering the Min Chiang estuary and bound for Foochow can

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be observed and intercepted. (Shelling of a Foochow-bound British merchant ship by Nationalist guns on Hsi-chuan Island in the Pai-ch'uan Lieh-tao group was reported in February 1961.) The hydrography of the Min Estuary is a distinct asset to the Nationalists in any harassment of Communist shipping. The offshore waters are a mariner's nightmare of sunken rocks, reefs, and shoals; especially hazardous is the passage over two longitudinal sand bars, the outer one located 8 miles from the river mouth. The least depth on this constantly shifting bar across the main channel is only about 14 feet. Consequently, safe passage requires local pilots, and large vessels must wait for high tide and an additional 14 feet of water. For centuries, the roadsteads west of Ma-tsu Shan (Nan-kan-t'ang) in the north and Hsi-ch'uan Tao (Tung-sha) in the south have been the principal anchorages and pilot transfer points in the region. Deprived of their use, few large vessels chance the passage into the Min Chiang.

Pai-ch'uan Lieh-tao, the southernmost islands of the Matsu complex, consist of 1-square-mile Hsi-ch'uan Tao, the slightly smaller Tung-ch'uan Tao, and numerous islets, rocks, and reefs. The islands are characterized by rounded hills, flat to rolling uplands, and, on Hsi-ch'uan Tao, extensive cultivated terraces. Coasts are generally rugged and precipitous, but each island has a few cove-head beach areas suitable for offloading from small craft. The 1,400 civilians on the larger island and 800 on the smaller are predominantly fishermen and farmers, all refugees from the Fukien mainland.

The garrisons of Pai-ch'uan Lieh-tao consist of 2,500 troops on Hsi-ch'uan Tao and 800 on Tung-ch'uan Tao. Both islands are fortified and could be defended for a brief period against amphibious assault despite their location within 12 miles of mainland gun positions. The rolling uplands, however, provide numerous drop zones suitable for airborne invasion. The islands are highly vulnerable to siege because of limited and exposed offloading facilities and, on Tung-ch'uan Tao, seasonal water shortages. Any Communist attempt to seize Pai-ch'uan Lieh-tao probably would lead to naval engagements in which prompt aid from Taiwan, 82 miles to the southeast, could be of critical importance. Unlike Quemoy, these islands and others of the Matsu complex lie far enough offshore to permit defensive maneuvers by defending naval forces.

Ma-tsu Lieh-tao, to the north, consist principally of Ma-tsu Shan -- the key-stone of Nationalist defenses in the Matsu complex -- and neighboring Ch'ang-hsü Shan (Pei-kan-t'ang). Kao-teng Hsü (Pei-sha Tao) is merely an outlying northern defense point for the group which includes eight additional islets and numerous rocks and reefs. Ma-tsu Shan, approximately 4 square miles in area, is the largest island of the Matsu complex. Although the terrain is predominantly rugged, with steep hills rising to over 800 feet and only a very small proportion of flat land, many of the slopes have been terraced for cultivation. The shoreline is exceptionally rocky and precipitous, but includes at least 9 cove-head beaches, 4 capable of handling LSMs. The principal harbor is at T'ieh-pan in the southwest. Although better sites are available at Fu-wu and Ma-tsu, they are easily observed from the mainland and therefore are highly vulnerable to artillery fire.

Ma-tsu Shan has a civilian population of 4,800, about evenly divided between farmers and fishermen. The densely populated island produces only about one-half of its normal food requirements; the remainder is shipped from Taiwan. The Matsu Area Defense Command, responsible for the defense of Ma-tsu Lieh-tao and Pai-ch'uan Lieh-tao, maintains headquarters and a garrison of 9,000 well-armed troops on this "solid rock fortress." Although defense is favored by the rugged terrain and by the limited size of beaches suitable for landings, the proximity of mainland artillery is a serious disadvantage. With heavy food requirements and seasonal water shortages, Ma-tsu Shan is particularly vulnerable to siege. As in the case of Pai-ch'uan Lieh-tao, however, naval elements could be of crucial importance in any battle for the island or its neighbors.

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Ch'ang-hsü Shan is about three-fourths the size of Ma-tsu Shan and slightly closer to mainland batteries. Although similar to the larger island, the shoreline of Ch'ang-hsü Shan is less precipitous, and beach areas are more extensive.

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Supplies transhipped from Ma-tsu Shan are offloaded at the improved harbor at Wu-sha, farther west, where observation from the mainland is difficult. The only landing field in the Matsu group is on Ch'ang-hsü Shan. It became operational in 1960 and can accommodate light planes. The civilian population of 3,000 is composed chiefly of farmers, with the remainder mostly fisher-

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